

Grape clones impress

by Debbie Gregory

SOME new clones of classic grape varieties will pave the way for the next wave in the New Zealand wine industry, according to a Gisborne viticulture nursery.

Challenging late harvest conditions have provided some startling results in Riversun Nursery's source block at Manutuke, particularly with some of the new clones of classic varieties, says Riversun managing director Geoff Thorpe.

Examples are two new imports of pinot gris and four of sauvignon blanc where the fruit is showing no signs of degradation while only metres away the industry standard clones are heavily infected with both botrytis and sour rot.

"In the last couple of weeks I have been getting more and more excited because some very clear differences have been showing up," said Mr Thorpe.

"We have had some rain events and high humidity – while these conditions are challenging for Gisborne growers, they have provided an opportunity for Riversun to monitor how the imported vines hold up in a tough year. We can see side by side – this clone is under pressure while this clone is clean as a whistle."

"Growers have said 'wow – that's very cool. I need that in my business – the ability to cope with disease pressure'."

Consultants, growers and wine companies were now all seriously interested and excited about the potential of the material.

Mr Thorpe said: "Growers are watching all their costs, and if they can spend less on crop thinning and disease



The difference is clear: "We can see side by side – this clone is under pressure and this clone is clean as a whistle" – Riversun's Geoff Thorpe. Picture by Dave Thomas

control, as well as be able to take their fruit through to full physiological ripeness without the fruit falling over from botrytis and sour rot, then that is a huge plus."

After consulting with the industry about what new material it wanted, Riversun scoured the world for the varieties and clones it needed to import, and in 2003 launched its quarantine facility for imported grapevine material.

Since then it has imported

more than 50 new varieties and clones and bulked them up in commercial volumes.

Mr Thorpe said there had been early interest from the industry in several of the new varieties but until this year not much interest in the new clones of the classic varieties such as chardonnay, sauvignon blanc and pinot noir and pinot gris.

The New Zealand wine industry was built on genetic material largely selected in the 1960s and 1970s and

Riversun's new imports give the industry the opportunity to take New Zealand world-beating wines to another level.

"This is so important because it is such a competitive wine market out there right now, and every country is constantly working to lift their quality.

"Here is a chance for the New Zealand wine industry to continue with that."

The parameters around vine selection had changed from the 1960s when plant breeders were looking for high yielding vines. Today, winemakers and viticulturists are more concerned with making high quality wines and ease of management in the vineyard, with a focus on disease resistance.

"Vines that deliver those qualities typically produce smaller berries in looser bunches."

In France, the focus was very much on disease resistance because they are trying to reduce chemical use.

"Around the world that has become a huge issue with consumers. Twenty years ago that was not a problem, but now consumers are saying they want wines, which are chemical free and carbon neutral.

"Suddenly the tools you have to manage disease in the vineyard are becoming restricted."

The disease resistance of the vines was a hugely important tool to help NZ Winegrowers achieve its target of having every New Zealand vineyard in its Sustainable Vineyard programme.

Mr Thorpe said it was still relatively early days with the new material but because this was the third vintage since the vines began bearing fruit clear trends were emerging.